

A Long-Awaited Reunion by **theamiableanachronism**

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Summary: In which Eleven returns, a promise is kept, and the trash gets taken out

A Long-Awaited Reunion

Jim's truck rolled to a stop in front of the Byers' house, tires crunching in the dirt. With a chunk of gears and jingle of keys, he turned off the engine.

The whole drive El had hardly been able to keep her eyes open, her head lolling from shoulder to shoulder as she drifted in and out of a restless sleep, but now, looking at the place that she had left behind an hour before, not knowing if she would ever see it again, she was wide awake. The adrenaline of the lab still hadn't worn off, but she knew that wasn't why her heart was pounding. Hands shaking, she undid her seatbelt and opened her door. She landed firmly on her feet but her legs started to shake. Though she'd collapsed in the lift and Jim had had to carry her back to the truck, she was sure resting on the way back would have helped her get her strength back. But she'd underestimated the effect closing the gate would have on her body; she had to lean against her door to keep from falling into the dirt. As if on cue, Jim came around the front of the truck and stopped in front of her, looking down into her pinched face with concern.

"Need a hand?" he offered quietly. She hesitated, trying to find the strength to walk on her own, but as her head started to throb and her legs to wobble, she sighed and nodded. Jim slipped one arm behind her back and took her hand to steady her as they made their way to the house. Immediately, some of the pain started to lessen.

From inside, they could hear the sounds of whispered argument and both frowned, trading a suspicious glance. They both noticed an unfamiliar blue car in front of the house and El's heart started to pound, her fists clenching. Jim positioned his hand over his holster and they cautiously approached the porch. Suddenly, the front door opened with a thunderous clap. Jim clamped a hand over his gun, ready to draw, but when he saw the figure in the doorway step into the light, he relaxed and breathed a sigh of relief. El, on the other hand, felt as though her heart was about to leap out of her chest.

"El!"

Mike ran through the doorway and jumped off the porch, landing

with a thud in the dirt before stumbling to his feet and running the rest of the way to El.

"You made it! You're okay!" His words came out in a breathless rush, relief written all over his extremely dirty face as he pulled her close. There was a pair of filthy goggles perched on top of his head and a bandana wrapped around his neck. His clothes were covered in dirt and ash and he reeked of gasoline.

El had never been more happy to see him and wrapped her arms around him as though she'd never let go.

She didn't realize how much she was leaning on him for support until the world slowly began to tilt forward. Jim had quicker reflexes and caught Mike's shoulder just before they fell to the ground.

"Careful kid, she's still pretty weak," Jim said softly. Mike nodded and quickly slipped his arm around her shoulders. He held out his hand and she held onto it like a lifeline.

"It's okay, I've got you," Mike whispered reassuringly.

"What's going on in there?"

"Billy. Max's stepbrother," Mike explained when Jim frowned in confusion. "She stabbed him with a syringe before we left and he's still out."

"Wait wait wait, a *syringe*? And what do you mean 'before you left'?"

Mike sighed. "We'll explain later but we need to get him out of the house before he wakes up."

Jim let out a slow breath through his nose, and El knew he was debating whether or not to demand an explanation now, but his shoulders relaxed and he said, "Okay. Let me check it out. You got her?"

Mike nodded and Jim turned to go.

"Chief?"

He turned. "Yeah?"

Mike swallowed and El watched a shadow of anger cross his face. "He tried to hurt Lucas. And he roughed Steve up pretty bad." Jim paused then nodded understandingly.

"I'll take care of it," he said solemnly and went into the house.

El's unsteadiness didn't let them move any faster than a snail's pace, but Mike held her tight and they slowly approached the porch.

"I knew you'd make it back," he said, smiling beatifically. "I knew you would."

El smiled softly, leaning into him, her heart feeling like it would burst. She looked up and caught the familiar sight of tears in his eyes. Gently, she squeezed his hand, relishing the fact that these were so very different from the ones she'd witnessed over the past year.

"I promised," she said, feeling a familiar pricking behind her own eyes. He squeezed her shoulder in response and smiled. But something behind her caught his eye and he stopped walking. A block of ice dropped into her stomach and concerned, she turned her own head, dreading what she might find. Her heart rose in her throat as her eyes scanned the darkness. Was it another monster? She could barely walk, how would she fight off one of those things?

But there was nothing but rising mist and distant trees. She looked back to Mike, confused, and realized he was smiling. The worry immediately dissipated but the confusion remained and she frowned.

"El?" he asked.

"Yes?"

"Is—El, is your hair... curly?"

She blinked. "Yes?" she said slowly.

For some reason, he laughed. Her heart leaped; it was the happiest sound she'd heard all day and she realized, with a clenching feeling in her chest, that it had been over a year since she'd heard it. She

must have made a face, because his smile immediately turned apologetic.

"Sorry, it's just – I've never seen you with long hair before. I mean, your own hair," he added quickly, looking embarrassed.

She lifted a hand to her head. Her hair was still smooth and cool to the touch, courtesy of Dottie's gel, and as she touched the fringe of curls on her neck that hadn't been tamped down, she realized how very different her hair still was from those long-lost golden waves. But Mike smiled and said quietly, "It's nice" with all the same quiet warmth she'd missed so much.

She dropped her hand and smiled, her cheeks warm. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he mumbled, his eyes crinkling at the corners and a blush spreading across his face.

The front door suddenly opened with a bang and she clamped down on Mike's hand. Distantly, she heard him wince and slackened her grip as Dustin slipped out onto the porch. She sighed in relief as his smiling face looked down at them.

"El you're back!"

"Hey, coming through!" He looked over his shoulder and jumped off the porch to let Jim, carrying the upper half of an unconscious teenager, pass by. This had to be Billy: his face was bloody. The other teenager, Steve, was carrying the feet, and he looked worse than Billy. Behind him were Lucas and the redheaded girl, Max. Why was she still here? She was following closely behind Lucas but when she saw El, she hung back, looking uncomfortable. Lucas jumped off the porch alone, following Dustin's example and swallowing El in a hug once he reached her.

"What took you so long?" He gave her shoulder a loving squeeze and El smiled.

Max passed, following Jim and Steve to the truck and as El watched Lucas and Dustin, all their attention was on the redhead. They looked almost as if they wanted to follow her, but neither of them did.

Something clenched in El's chest.

Max opened the back passenger door and held it open for Jim and Steve to unceremoniously shove Billy into the backseat. As Jim slammed the door shut, he turned and saw the group of kids huddled next to the porch and frowned.

"What are you still doing out here? You stay out here any longer you're gonna freeze to death. Get inside." He jerked his head toward the still-open front door. Behind him, the blue car roared to life. Steve was at the wheel and Jim gave him a wave before turning back to them. "Get inside," he repeated, opening the driver's side door and watching them sternly. "I mean it," he said, waiting for each of them to nod before pulling the rest of his body inside the cab.

He started the truck and started to pull away from the house. The blue car turned on its headlights and followed it down the road.

They all stood and watched the cars drive away, Max conspicuously separated from the group, something El wished she wasn't keenly aware of. Once the red of their taillights had faded into the darkness, Max was the first one into the house. El noticed Dustin and Lucas share a significant look and the clenched feeling came back. She focused on climbing up the porch steps and making her way inside, trying not to notice Max sitting alone at the kitchen table, facing away from the front door.

Mike lowered her gently into the cushions and she sunk back into them, her eyelids heavy.

"Hey El?" Dustin asked. "Funny question, but is your hair curly?"

She looked at Mike, who simply grinned back, and nodded, her lips twitching up into a smile.

"I knew it!" he said, clapping his hands triumphantly. "Hey, we're almost twins!"

"You're not twins!" Lucas called from the kitchen. Dustin made a face at him and sunk into an armchair, pointing from himself to El and mouthing the word "twins".

"Where are they taking Billy?" Mike asked, sitting down next to El.

Dustin grinned, drumming his fingers on the armrests, clearly relishing the explanation he was about to give.

"Down to the station. They're going to ram his car into a tree. Make it look like a drunk driving accident or something."

"No, that's not what they're doing—"

"Do you want to tell the story, Lucas?" he demanded, sitting up straight. Lucas rolled his eyes.

Max turned around in her chair. "That's just what they're going to put on the report. It's not that big a deal."

"It is a big deal!" Dustin protested. "He could be stuck in a cell for a month."

"Where he belongs," Lucas agreed with barely-concealed anger.

Dustin nodded then grinned. "The ramming the car into a tree part was Max's idea. Said it would make it look more real."

El looked at Max. The redhead rolled her eyes at Lucas and they shared a smile across the table. They looked... happy. The clenching feeling came back into her chest.

Her head started to throb and she squeezed her eyes shut against the pain, letting her head loll onto Mike's shoulder. Mike's and Dustin's voices immediately hushed, saying something about tunnels and tomorrow but it was all becoming a blur as sleep overtook her. She gave Mike's hand one last gentle squeeze and fell asleep.